

# PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE ARAB WORLD



AP Photo/Khalil Hamra

**R**evolutionary protests in 2011  
up-ended long-standing authoritarian  
regimes in the Arab world. What lies ahead  
for Egypt, Tunisia, and other nations undergoing political change? How can  
the challenges of moving from regime change to democratic governance  
be overcome? RAND researchers mined four decades of democratization  
successes and setbacks for lessons.

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE <b>2012</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Prospects for Democratization in the Arab World</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>RAND Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, 1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA, 90407-2138</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>5</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

# “ Regime change is only the first step; now, long processes of political and institutional reform are needed. ”

On December 17, 2010, Tunisian street vendor Mohammed al-Bou‘azizi’s self-immolation ignited revolutionary protests across the Arab world. Masses of people began calling for political and economic change. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, rulers were ousted. In Syria, Bahrain, and elsewhere, old regimes were newly challenged in the streets and online. Governing structures in the region, previously untouched by global democratization trends, were shaken by the Arab Spring.

Daunting challenges lie ahead for those countries where revolutions succeeded and where, as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, free elections have now been held. There are no clear roadmaps for new leaders working to establish enduring democracies or for outside actors hoping to encourage democratization. However, past democratic transitions offer important lessons for policymakers by revealing the factors and actions that can contribute to the success—or failure—of transitions to democracy.

Analyzing both current developments in the Arab world and instances around the globe of democratization after regime change since the mid-1970s, RAND researchers have identified challenges that Arab countries may face, as well as approaches that new governments and the international community can take to improve the prospects for democratization.

## Arab Countries Face Considerable Challenges

Democracy has been gaining ground throughout the world since the mid-1970s, with considerably more countries categorized as “free” in 2011 than in 1973.<sup>1</sup> These changes have been felt in every region except the Arab world. Successes and setbacks encountered by democratizing nations during those four decades suggest that many challenges—including those described below—might lie ahead for Egypt, Tunisia, and other Arab countries undergoing political transitions.

<sup>1</sup> In 1973, Freedom House rated 29 percent of countries “free” and 43 percent “not free.” In 2011, 45 percent of countries were rated “free” and 24 percent “not free.” See Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2011,” web page, undated. As of June 13, 2012: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2011>

**1. Democratization will test how well Islamic and secular parties can share political space.** Islamism is a distinctive feature of Arab political culture, but it is not yet clear what difference this distinction will make in the outcomes of political transitions.

**2. A difficult struggle to subordinate the military to civilian control may ensue.** Democracy cannot be consolidated until a country’s military is subordinated to civilian authority. In Egypt especially, the new government must deal with a military that has strong interests in maintaining its political influence and lucrative business enterprises.

**3. Many institutions will need to be reformed or newly created.** Arab countries transitioning from highly personalistic regimes will confront considerable state-building challenges. Countries transitioning from strong institutionalized authoritarian systems will require the type of thorough institutional reform that was needed during democratization in Eastern Europe.

**4. New governments will need to manage state and social cohesion problems.** Sectarian and ethnic divisions, threats to territorial integrity, and insurgencies will test new Arab governments’ capabilities and commitment to implementing policies that are consistent with democratic decisionmaking, civilian control over security institutions, and human rights.

**5. Economic problems may complicate transitions.** The same dissatisfaction with economic conditions that helped drive regime changes poses a challenge in the aftermath. The greatest risk to democratization in Tunisia may be that ineffective democratic governance could make its citizens amenable to renewing the old bargain that exchanged political rights for economic benefits.

## These Challenges Can Be Overcome

Past experiences in diverse conditions throughout the world show that the types of challenges Arab countries in transition face can be overcome. Particular factors tending to contribute to or undermine democratization rarely determine outcomes.





Failure to meet popular expectations of improved living standards can make a transition more difficult, for example, but in such countries as Mongolia and Argentina, severe post-regime change economic deterioration did not derail democratization.

Arab countries lack experience with political pluralism, but so too did many other countries that have become democracies. Some Arab countries have sectarian or other social divides that will complicate efforts to build consensus around new political arrangements, but such divisions have not been a bar to democratization elsewhere.

Moreover, many past transitions have been turbulent and still succeeded. In retrospect, successful democratization often looks more inevitable than it seemed at the time. Portugal, for instance, had six provisional governments in the first 27 months of its transition, and it experienced mass purges and a transitional military government riven by ideological differences.

## Policy Approaches Can Improve the Chances of Success

Democratization is a complex, multidimensional process that often unfolds over the course of many years, and circumstances in each of the Arab countries we examined are too diverse for one-size-fits-all prescriptions for new governments and for the international community. Nonetheless, certain policy approaches undertaken by leaders in transitioning Arab countries may improve the prospects for successful democratization:

- **The participation of Islamists in the political process can help stabilize a transition.** In past transitions, engaging with formerly banned parties or Islamist parties within the electoral sphere helped to smooth transitions and enhance a new government's legitimacy. Responsibility for governance can have a moderating and disciplining effect on new political parties.
- **Gradualism in asserting civilian control of the military can help keep democratization on track.** Where militaries have both the capability to thwart democratization and strong institutional interests in maintaining political and economic privileges, their acquiescence in a reduced political role often needs to be negotiated, with some continued prerogatives offered in exchange.
- **Constitution-making offers a unique opportunity to advance democratization.** Although symbolically important issues, such as the role of Islam and military prerogatives, will probably receive outsized attention, the political ground rules hardwired into new constitutions will be more important for democratization over the long term.
- **Postponing transitional justice may be warranted.** Although new governments may experience pressure to hold former regime leaders accountable for abuses, a rush to conduct trials may reinforce lingering politicization of justice systems. Deferring transitional justice has not been an impediment to democratization.

Policymakers in the international community should bear in mind that external actors will have limited leverage over transition processes in the Arab world. In some circumstances, certain types of foreign aid can be helpful in smoothing transitions, and diplomatic pressure should not be neglected, but internal dynamics will be the main drivers of democratization. Nevertheless, there are many reasons for external actors to be cautiously optimistic about and supportive of democratic transitions in Arab countries. The following international policy approaches can be helpful:

- **Plan to provide assistance and advice consistently and over the long term.** External actors' policies and expecta-

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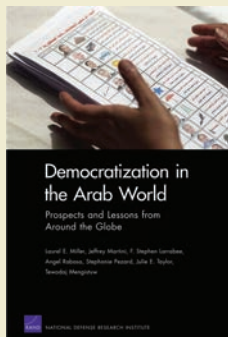
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tions should reflect the long-term nature of democratization, especially in Libya, Yemen, and other countries that also face serious state-building challenges.

- **Emphasize foreign aid directed specifically at building democratic institutions and processes.** Support for elections and projects designed to build civil society can be more effective in promoting democratization than other types of aid. To help foster government accountability, assistance should include support to independent media outlets, anticorruption and human rights monitoring groups, and organizations that provide civic education.
- **Support the establishment of civilian control of security institutions.** External actors can support efforts to establish civilian control of security institutions through assistance in professionalizing militaries and internal security organs; help in developing parliamentary and other oversight structures; and the creation of strategic interdependence through security assistance, security agreements, joint exercises, and related measures.
- **Encourage the creation of mutually reinforcing and supporting structures.** Regional structures that create governmental and civil society connections among countries in transition can facilitate the delivery of practical institution-building assistance and reinforce democratization through moral suasion. For some Arab countries, Western assistance channeled through a regional organization may also be more palatable than bilateral assistance.



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This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Democratization in the Arab World: Prospects and Lessons from Around the Globe* by Laurel E. Miller, Jeffrey Martini, F. Stephen Larrabee, Angel Rabasa, Stephanie Pezard, Julie E. Taylor, Tewodaj Mengistu, MG-1192-RC, 2012, 434 pp., \$44.95, ISBN: 978-0-8330-7207-8 (available at <http://rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1192.html>).

This research brief was written by Laurel E. Miller, Kate Giglio, and Erin-Elizabeth Johnson. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.



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